Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences

In collaboration with the Section Philosophy & Psychiatry
of the European Psychiatric Association

Crossing Dialogues Association

DIALOGUES

"Aliens", borders, people... and the racist invasion of our words (and world)

Nicola Cocco
Italian Society of Migration Medicine, SIMM (Italy)

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: October 13, 2025, 2025
Accepted: October 23, 2025, 2025
Firstly published online: November 21, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by
Ass. Crossing
Dialogues, Italy

KEYWORDS
Immigrants, Migration Studies, Racism, Dehumanization

CORRESPONDENCE
Dr Nicola Cocco
Italian Society of Migration Medicine (SIMM)
Email: nicola.cocco@asst-santipaolocarlo.it

Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto
(Publius Terentius Afer, *Heauton Timorumenos*, 163 BC)

DIAL PHIL MENT NEURO SCI 2025; 18(1):37-38

In his/her analysis published in this journal in May 2025, Maxima Libertas examined the increasingly pervasive and dehumanizing use of the term "alien" in relation to migrant people (Libertas, 2024). Far from a mere semantic disquisition, the question touches on a crucial issue: the "linguistic," and therefore entirely cultural, declination of systemic/structural racism in Western societies, starting with the United States. The term "alien," in its dehumanizing and frankly racist use, can be related to a concept of border already analyzed ten years ago in Italy by Alessandro Leogrande: the so-called "frontier" (Leogrande, 2015).

Moreover, in recent years we are witnessing an amplification of the concept of "border," which is becoming increasingly pervasive in the social and psychological life of communities that consider themselves "highly resourced." There is the actual border, such as the Mexico-US one or the Mediterranean Sea, a physical barrier that political propaganda tends to reinforce with real walls and alarmist, security-oriented, criminalizing, and racist discourses, a barrier often punctuated by the deaths of thousands who attempt to cross it. There is the "externalized" border that aims to widen and amplify the physical border, such as that created by the 2024 Italy-Albania Agreement with the establishment of migrant detention centres managed by Italy as veritable "penal colonies" in a non-EU state that passively accepts this neo-colonial approach (Bego, 2023). This is a perspective also envisaged in the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum, which will be implemented in 2026, despite the evident problems of institutional racism that characterize it (Associazione Italiana di Epidemiologia & Società Italiana di Medicina delle Migrazioni, 2025).

Finally, there is the most subtle and difficult-to-determine frontier: the "internalized border" by individuals in high-resource societies, a wall of racism, hypocrisy, victimhood, and delusion that represents an excellent breeding ground for all kinds of class-based and heterogeneous

violence. At the root of this "explosion" of the concept of frontier, both within and outside individuals, lies precisely the internalization of the notion of an "us-them" dichotomy, which manifests itself through the use of terms like "alien" to indicate that which is not "us," that which is not white, that which is poor, and, in essence, "different." The downgrading of diversity to a social problem rather than valorizing it as a structural wealth of the world (see Morin's (2022) lesson) is well represented by this increasingly normalized, dehumanizing use of the term "alien." As Volpato (2011) highlighted, violence results from the normalization of dehumanizing practices, and Maxima Libertas (2024) was right to highlight the risks inherent in the "normalization" of the "violent" use of the term "alien" to refer to migrant people. In a similar "linguistic-socio-etymological" reflection, we highlighted how in European countries the foreigner, the guest (*hospes* in Latin), considered sacred by Greco-Roman culture, is now relegated by mainstream discourse to an enemy of society, "*hostilis*," so pernicious as to merit confinement or detention, the condition of "*captivus*," to which is added the moral connotation of evil (Italian "*cattivo*") (No CPR Salute, 2023).

Words reflect the world, and in this case they contribute to its explosion: it is the task of intellectuals and scientists to try to defuse the most explosive racist words and concepts, in search of building dialogues, bridges and networks based on the longed-for and increasingly necessary "coexistence of diversity" (Acanfora, 2020).

REFERENCES

Acanfora F. (2020) La diversità è negli occhi di chi guarda: superare il concetto di inclusione della diversità sul lavoro [E-book]: https://www.fabrizioacanfora.eu

Associazione Italiana di Epidemiologia, Società Italiana di Medicina delle Migrazioni (2025) Gli effetti del Patto europeo su migrazione e asilo sulla salute delle popolazioni migranti . Epidemiologia e Prevenzione, 49:125-128.

Bego F. Italy still views Albania through a colonial lens. Balcan Insight, 17.07.2023, https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/17/italy-still-views-albania-through-a-colonial-lens/

Leogrande A. (2015) La frontiera. Feltrinelli, Milano.

Libertas M. (2024). Alien invasion: why talking about illegal aliens is harmful and leads to dehumanization, and the role of intellectuals and scientists against stigmatization. Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences, 17:52-58.

Morin E. (2022) The challenge of complexity: essays by Edgar Morin. Liverpool University Press, Liverpool.

No CPR Salute (2023). Da hospes a captivus: le basi psicopatogene della criminalizzazione delle persone migranti e della detenzione amministrativa. Medicina Democratica, 01.05.2023, https://www.medicinademocratica.org/wp/?p=14659

Volpato C. (2011) Deumanizzazione: come si legittima la violenza. Laterza, Roma and Bari.